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THE ALLIED OFFENSIVE—FOURTH "WIPERS"

A Renewal of Combat on the Sector Which Has Seen the Most Tremendous Fighting of the War

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When one endeavors to review the latest Allied operations, the opening of a new offensive in Flanders, there is an immediate realization of how much history has been made in that narrow triangle between the Lys River, the North Sea and the French frontier. No single sector of the European battlefield has seen so continuous or tremendous fighting, and the past pales before the present.

Going back nearly three years to the early days of October, 1914, it will be recalled that Field Marshal Sir John French took his troops out of the trenches at the Aisne and started them north. His objective was the German right flank south of Lille—still held by the French. His army was transported north to the vicinity of St. Omer and Estaires, then it wheeled to the east and moved toward the German flank.

What followed is history, not even now familiar. The small British army came almost immediately into contact with huge German forces, its own flank was threatened when Antwerp fell and the German conquerors came pounding down along the coast through Ostend to the Yser River.

Almost at once the British offensive became a desperate and almost despairing defensive. To the north the British flank was bent round until it faced north, not east, and in the south the centre was jammed back upon Ypres and one after another all the vantage points were lost, until the Ypres salient assumed the shape it was to bear for nearly three years and the British were threatened with complete annihilation.

The first days of November, 1914, saw the end of the storm. French reserves came up, the Prussian Guard made its final unsuccessful effort—the road to Calais was b[illegible]red, and trench warfare was now the [illegible] of things from Switzerland to the North Sea. And while the British regular army, the "Old Contemptibles," was dying at Ypres, the French Fusiliers Marins made their great sacrifice at Dixmude. December 1 saw the first struggle in Flanders ended; an exhausted British army had just managed to hang on—regiments reduced to handfuls, brigades now at the strength of companies.

The Poison Gas Attack

Five months later the Flanders battlefields woke to new fame. In the latter days of April the Germans launched their first poison gas attack to the westward of Ypres—between this town and Dixmude. The blow fell upon French African troops, and they collapsed, opening the flank of the Canadians just west of Ypres, and for a few hours the German road to Calais was clear.

But the French rallied, the Canadians stood and died in an unequal struggle, reserves came and the gap was closed. Thereafter it was necessary to draw the British line back nearer to Ypres; towns now mentioned in the latest battle news were abandoned; the French, driven beyond the Yser Canal, came back and made good this line—the British clung to Ypres, which now disappeared under German shelling. This position was, however, always dangerous, for the Germans, sitting on the hills which surround Ypres like the rim of a bowl, poured their artillery fire into the British below.

And from May 1, 1915, to June 1, 1917, the British took their medicine. The Ypres salient acquired evil fame as the worst position on the Western front. One school of British experts urged retreat because of the military weakness of the position—a retreat to the hills behind, to Kemmel and Scharfenberg; another insisted that the moral effect would be too great if the Germans at last entered Ypres. And this view prevailed.

An Artillery Training School

From May, 1915, to June of this year Ypres ceased to be a point of dispute, although it was never a quiet point. The Germans used the sector to train their artillery; the observation conditions were so favorable. Day and night shells rained down upon Ypres until little was left of its wonderful architectural monuments.

But in June of this year the British suddenly struck. Between Ypres and Armentières the Germans in October, 1914, had driven in a wedge gaining the high ground of the Messines or Wytschaete ridge—the "white sheet" ridge of the "Tommy." From this ridge they swept the two roads leading into Ypres from the west. Literally, the Germans sat on the benches of a stadium and shelled the British in the pit below. This blow abolished the Ypres salient, straightened the British line from Ypres to Armentières and not merely "put out" the German eyes but also gave the British the observation points looking eastward at the Lys and beyond the Lys to Lille.

This quick thrust, it is now clear, was the first step in a grander operation. It was necessary to blind the Germans before the great preparations could be made for a general offensive, and the time from June to August measures the period of intensive preparation for the new offensive.

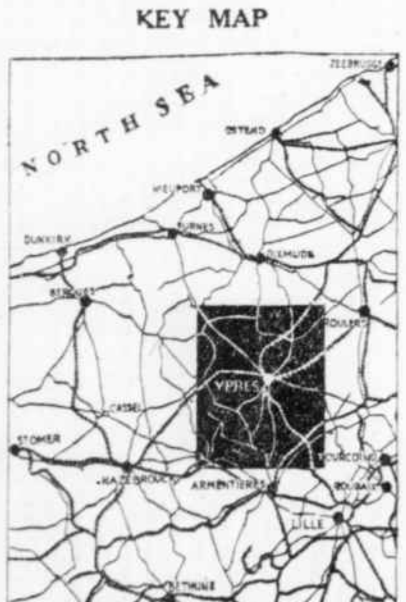
Why Ypres?

Why did the British select the Ypres sector for their offensive? It seems to me that they were in part compelled to do this by the Hindenburg retreat of the spring. This left a desert, destitute of communication, from St. Quentin to the vicinity of Arras. The Vimy Ridge offensive broke down the buttress of this new German line—the Hindenburg line—but the "switch lines" behind remained. To continue at this point meant the destruction of many French cities and towns, Douai, Cambrai and more remotely Valenciennes; it meant the ruin of the great industrial region of France, and it meant fighting over a country thickly studded with villages and towns which lent themselves to defensive preparation.

To strike further north between La Bassée and Lens meant ultimate ruin to Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing, great industrial towns with a combined population of more than 400,000. It meant destruction to a great and densely populated region of France, and it meant fighting over ground highly advantageous to the Germans.

To strike between the Lys and the sea, on the other hand, meant to fight over an agricultural region with almost no considerable towns. It meant to operate in country relatively flat and offering no such obstacles as the Somme region, with its many hills and deep cut valleys. It meant also operating in the sector nearest to

KEY MAP



Great Britain, and therefore nearest to the sea bases, thus reducing the problem of rail transportation in France—no inconsiderable factor.

The ultimate strategic advantage of success in the Ypres sector is plain. An advance of twenty miles, that is, an advance equal to that made from Roye to the environs of Sr. Quentin this spring, would compel the Germans to quit all the region between the Lys and the sea, to give up the Belgian seacoast, to abandon their troublesome submarine base at Zeebrugge and their even more troublesome aeroplane bases behind the coast, whence London has been so frequently raided.

At the end of a campaign like that of the Somme last year the British might hope to occupy a front from Holland southward behind the Lys River. Or they might hope to force the passage of the Lys, having taken Menin and Cambrai, and turn the Germans out of Lille, Tourcoing and Roubaix, without actually fighting in or about these towns.

French's Original Purpose

To cut the Germans off from the coast would be to achieve the first purpose of Field Marshal Sir John French in October, 1914, a purpose mainly missed because Winston Churchill went to Antwerp, kept the Belgian army in the doomed city too long and wrecked all the plans of the French General Staff and the British field commander thereby.

But no one could expect that the new Anglo-French attack would accomplish any of these objectives in its first phase. There were ultimate ends, to be attained, if at all, only after weeks and months of steady pressure and great fighting, to be realized only after a campaign, not an assault.

Meantime, with German reserves failing, German armies outgunned and outnumbered, the British and French could hope to inflict greater losses than they incurred, weaken the German morale, already deteriorating, and finally prevent any transfer of German divisions to the east to take profit from the Russian collapse. And just as the German army before the Marne was concerned not with the capture of cities, not even of Paris, but the destruction of French armies, the British are now mainly occupied not with regaining French or Belgian territory, but with reducing German effectiveness. All else is incidental, as it was for the Germans in the Marne campaign.

Such, in a general way, were and are the objectives of the Anglo-French offensive. The real measure of its success or failure will be the extent to which it inflicts casualties greater than its own upon the Germans. If it does this we shall see this autumn or next spring a new German retreat to shorter lines, or a collapse of German lines due to an attempt to hold too long a line with insufficient numbers. But nothing is less likely than a piercing of the German front this year. It may come, just as the Germans might conceivably have pierced the French lines at Verdun, when they had numbers and superior artillery. But it is even less unlikely to penetrate than was the Verdun thrust, which had an element of surprise totally lacking in the present Allied operation.

Ground Gained the First Day

Turning now to the actual progress of the first attack, we see that the French, from Dixmude to Bixschoote, forced the crossings of the Yser, took back the ground lost in the gas attack and dug themselves in. On the west they were handicapped by the condition of the country, due to the flooding of the Yser Valley at the time of the first fighting in October, 1914. But eastward the ground was more favorable and they made greater progress, reaching and passing the highway from Lizerne to Dixmude, that was more or less the string to that bow which was their old position.

The British on their part, pushing north and east, reached and in parts passed the ridge which they had held before the gas attack of 1915, taking possession of Pilhem, which gives its name to the ridge, and taking and losing St. Julien, the extreme northern limit of their advance. East and south of Ypres, along the Menin road, famous in the first "Wipers," they took Hooge and made progress from this point down to the environs of Warneton on the Lys, regaining a considerable portion of the ground lost in October and November, 1914, but by no means reaching all the positions held when that battle opened.

Compared with the opening attack at the Somme this was a material improvement, for the first and second German lines were everywhere taken, while at the Somme on half the front the German first line held during the July 1 attack, and for many months thereafter, all the way from Gommecourt to Thiepval. Compared with the progress made in the battle of Arras it was disappointing, both as to guns, prisoners and distance, demonstrating that Arras had been a real surprise to the Germans.

But it is well to remember that the method of attack is steadily changing and the lessons of the French failure at the Aisne have not been lost. Here the French sought too much. Mangin expected to reach Laon, and the ground gained was hardly worth the cost in casualties. By limiting operations and thus increasing the value of artillery assistance the British seem to have gained a mile to a mile and a half of ground on a wide front at relatively low cost.

The small capture of guns and the few prisoners—five thousand, as against eleven thousand on the first day of the Battle of Arras—indicate that the Germans had been expecting an attack and had withdrawn their guns and held their front line lightly. The recent terrific German drive at the Aisne, too, was patently intended to prevent the transfer of French soldiers to the Yser front, and as such failed, as it also failed to gain ground.

Allied Supremacy in Heavy Guns

German and British reports agree that the artillery duel which preceded the attack was the heaviest in all history, and for a full fortnight London heard the guns. The British and French reports frankly claim a complete supremacy in the air, which would mean that the Germans were obliged to fire in the dark—"into blue," as the phrase is, that is, without the aid of air scouts.

Apparently bad weather materially handicapped the attacking force, as it did in the Battle of Arras. It seems also that there was a temporary slowing down after the original attack, but whether this was due to weather or to new tactics remains to be seen. Strong German counter attacks developing at once, as contrasted with the forty-hour delay after the recent fight at the Messines Ridge, suggest also German counter preparation and advance information. Similarly the little German thrust which destroyed two British battalions north of the Yser near its mouth some days ago was an obvious attempt to forestall and break up an Allied drive in this region.

So much for the first attack, begun and ended on August 1, the anniversary of the opening of the world war and thirteen months later than the attack at the Somme. For the present the Allied objective must be Roulers, rather more than a dozen miles north of Ypres and Menin, to the east on the Lys, rather less than ten miles from the present front. The fall of Menin would gravely imperil the German hold on Lille, the capture of Roulers would threaten, yet without menacing seriously, the German communications with Zeebrugge via Ghent and Bruges.

A Long Operation

Meantime, it is idle to discuss these objectives with any idea that they will be reached immediately. Nothing of the sort is likely to happen. But we can see exactly what the ultimate strategic effect would be of a campaign as successful as that of last year. It would mean a German retirement from the seacoast, precisely as a German retirement from the Noyon and Bapaume salients was made inevitable by the Somme Battle.

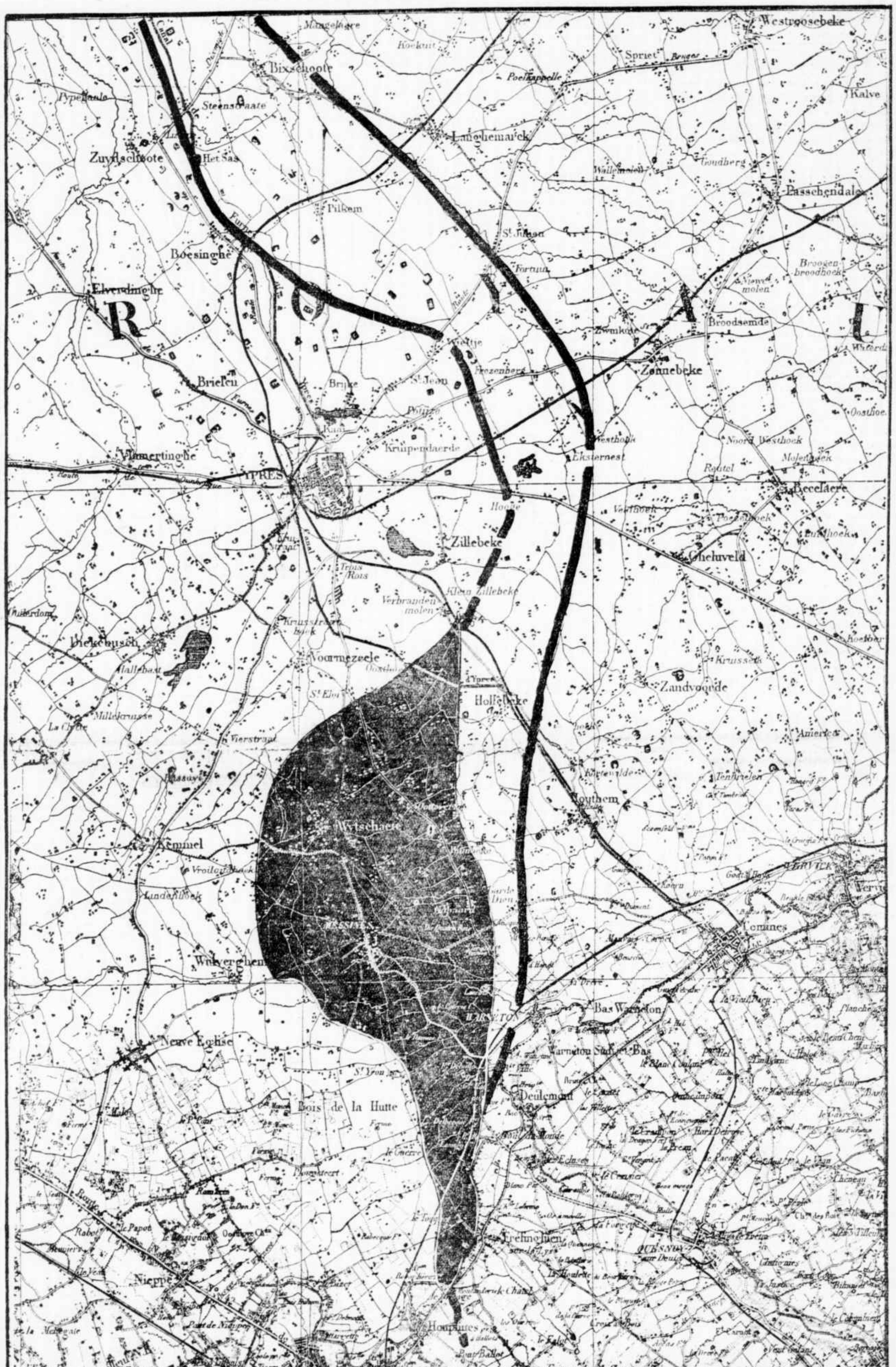
Yet as this contest may well prove the decisive battle of the war, the German efforts to hold out and the German efforts to convince the world and their own people that they are holding are bound to be desperate and may easily confuse the readers of bulletins who accept the German statement that the Allies have failed because they have not at once achieved what they could only hope to achieve not in a day, but in a period of months.

Recall again the campaign of 1864 in our own Civil War, read what the Confederate press said after the Wilderness, Spottsylvania, Cold Harbor, the failure before Petersburg. It will furnish many a parallel with current German bulletins. Recall also that Napoleon, having been defeated in Saxony in 1813, fought next in the Marne country because he had stayed too long in Germany, sacrificing military to political and moral considerations.

We are at the beginning of a campaign that may well have consequences comparable with those of Leipsic or the last Grant campaign. But we are only at the beginning.

Allied Strategy Aims at Clearing the Belgian Coast

THE FRANCO-BRITISH DRIVE



Scale 1/63,360 or 1 Inch - 1 Statute Mile

Left hand heavy black line shows position before the attack. Right shows position after the attack. Solid black area shows ground gained in the attack on the Messines Ridge